DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 044 401 TE 002 077

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TITLE Teaching the Classics.
INSTITUTION New York State English Council, Oswego.
PUB DATE Feb 70
NOTE 8p.
JOURNAL CIT English Record; v20 n3 p25-32 Feb 1970

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.50
DESCRIPTORS Content Analysis, Creative Reading, Drama, *Educational Objectives, *Literary Analysis, Literary Styles, *Literature, *Literature Appreciation, Novels, Poetry

ABSTRACT

The English teacher should have two aims: to help his students appreciate the literary values contained in literary works and to help them read with sensitivity and sophistication so that they will want to read. Consequently, the teacher who concentrates on making contemporary applications of literary works instead of dealing with the literary nature of the works themselves is failing his students. That teacher is equally misguided who teaches a work simply because of his own or his students' personal preferences for it, with little or no concern about utilizing the work to educate his students' taste. (DD)

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English Record, Vol. 20, No. 3, February 1970.

ED044401

TEACHING THE CLASSICS

Michael L. Lasser

So far as I can tell, in my self-appointed role of iconoclast, all too many English teachers who use the "classics" in their classrooms are doing few favors either to their students or to the particular work of literature under consideration. Some seem to me to be suggesting by their methodology that we should teach down or pander to our students by encouraging them to talk in class not about the literary work itself but about themselves, to make immediate contemporary applications rather than to deal with the literary nature of the work. A writer once described what he called an enthusiastic teacher: "He doesn't emphasize the number of iambic pentameter lines in *Romeo and Juliet;* he lights up the reading of the play by asking the students how they feel about parents' interference in marriage or about the possibility of serious mature love in an adolescent's life. Such a teacher helps the class get to the heart of the play without stumbling over its technical problems." [1] But how it get at *its* heart without dealing with technical matters! I confess to being overtly less interested in English class in the current forms of the universal conflicts between the generations than I am in helping students learn a sense of themselves and of the world beyond. While *Romeo and Juliet* may well deal with problems of adolescent love and the generation gap, it does not live because it continues to parade before us these common and even pedestrian concerns. True, they are valid and they may well need elucidation, but only insofar as they contribute to the *play's* essential and continuing appeal, regardless of who reads it and how old he is when he does so.

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While I would not replace self-indulgence with dry exercises in scansion, I would try to teach some knowledge of the literary uses of language in general and Shakespeare's lyric line in particular, and some affection for them as well. Moreover, I would be sure to dwell on the play's tragic perception in an attempt to help my students grow in their awareness of their world through

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an awareness of Romeo and Juliet's. Indeed, we do want to get at the heart of the play, but not by reducing it to soap opera. To make a work familiar is one thing; to make it banal is quite another.

And yet, it is true that the English class deals with human values. I would insist, however, that it does so no more than many other classes, although perhaps more directly much of the time. Primarily, we should be teaching English, a subject matter of intrinsic and practical value. The Commission on English, in *Freedom and Discipline in English,* that excellent study dealing with the teaching of students being prepared, among other things, to succeed in college, comments:

> What can the teacher do about literature? He can talk about works expertly, ask questions about them, discuss them, think highly of them, and show his students how to think, talk, and write about what they read. Above all, he should be able . . . to improve their ability to read. This is criticism, and this criticism, this process of coming to understand and evaluate, goes on as long as whatever we read continues to touch our interests and experience.[2]

The purpose in teaching a work of literature, I would say, is twofold—for the literary values it contains and for its usefulness in enabling us to teach students how to read with sensitivity and sophistication so that they will want to read. For our hypothesis I would offer this: the intelligent trained reader takes pleasure from a work of literature insofar as it rewards his extension of intelligent effort. And he needs training to extend that effort effectively and appropriately. Our purpose is, simply, to teach toward enjoyment and enrichment, but in no superficial manner. It is, moreover, the sensible combination of traditional, modern, and current works of quality in a curriculum which provides us with the best opportunity to teach successfully.

For example, having taught *Walden,* which most of my students usually admire despite what I have heard about its unpopularity from other teachers, I would never ask a student how Thoreau has enriched his life in our four or five weeks of study. Which does not mean that I do not care; only that I do not ask. For besides encouraging an insincere answer, my question would insist that what may work on a student subtly, unconsciously, or over a long period of time be made immediately overt and relevant. This strikes me as an act disrespectful of my student's intellect and his privacy, even in the public act of class discussion. After all, I do not necessarily expect my students to share my affections nor, in the case of Thoreau, to leave

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for the woods tomorrow morning because either they or I admire him as a man or a writer. Just as our refusal to run off with Thoreau in no way diminishes *Walden's* relevance, so a teacher's specious attempt to make him into the adolescent incarnate often chases off the student and denies the teacher the opportunity to teach Thoreau's real relevance. In this case, Thoreau's persona communicates much more sincerely and directly than the teacher's.

Furthermore, in situations where the teacher refuses to pander to what may be his classes' sentimental loyalty merely to the present moment, he may often slip into the equally dangerous conceit of the apology for literature, most often poetry. We assume that boys will not like poetry, so we apologize for it; we assume that girls will, so we overcompensate by accepting cheerfully their often maudlin, effete responses. By our reactions, we do a disservice both to our students and to poetry. I am not suggesting that we tell the young lady she is inane and the young gentleman that he is boorish when both may be merely untrained. While this paper is not primarily concerned with methodology, it does assert, I hope, that what is crucial is that students be taught how to read literature in the hope that they will read it, will make demands of it and of themselves, and will find pleasure and satisfaction in it. To begin its study with an apology or with flatulent enthusiasm is only to invite the kind of gross, anti-intellectual responses we supposedly despise but whose presence is largely our own fault—masculine repugnance and feminine effusion.

Despite these problems and my demurrers, values are relevant in the English classroom, simply because authors or, more precisely, their characters and personas have them and then express them through a manipulation of language. T. S. Eliot once told a questioner that the act of making the poem had little to do with the thought which had inspired it or the particular emotional or intellectual commitment to be expressed; the moment of composition was devoted to the problems of rhyme and line and word—the way to contain the thought and render it meaningful through the poet's manipulation of the precise, factual, often ambiguous details of which imagery is comprised and poems built. We also know that imagery and figurative language conspire in numerous ways to manipulate the reader, to control his response. Obviously, I do not intend to portray the poet as a kind of subtle totalitarian, but the poem, while always shaped in part by a reader's individual response to it, also always retains its own identity. The fact that I happen to dislike the scent of lilacs should have absolutely nothing to do with my response to

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," itself, and to Whitman's primary symbol in that magnificent poem.

While I expect a student to read at the very least for the "story" and its structure, I teach from the premise that the work is more enjoyable and satisfying when the class grasps the story and then uses it to move beyond to character, theme, and tone, for example, all of which the writer reveals through the suggestive, often-conscious, and indirect use of language which we call literary. The discussion of a character like Billy Budd, of course, does not simply deal with his innocence, but with the way in which Melville creates that character, invests it with symbolic and tragic possibilities, and then makes use of it as part of an entire and complex work. Close analysis well-taught leads not to boredom but to discovery, first about the work and then, perhaps, about the self. As James M. Cox has written, "The mystery of poetry is discovered and enhanced—not imperiled—by rigorous analysis." [3] The classics are works which often lend themselves well to the kind of creative analysis I have in mind. They possess a richness and depth of language which marks writing that lasts and which incites a constructive response from readers. Again, the Commission on English notes:

> When he has the text before him, a good reader makes a deliberate effort to keep intrusive thoughts and feeling out of the way of what the text is saying—a needful precaution against irrelevant associations or stock responses. But once he has read a work and closed the book, the experience begins to melt into all his other interests and feelings . . . and the questions it now evokes point toward his whole experience. This is as it should be. . . .[4]

In other words, I do not think that we should preach about values overtly in our classrooms; we should teach instead the values inherent in the work. While it is true that a novel by Dickens may stimulate in our students sympathy for humanity on all social levels and that *Macbeth* may illustrate for them the corruption and violence resulting from an excessive pursuit of power, we will want to be sure to teach those values as they are presented in the work. Be the piece of writing *Oliver Twist* or *Moll Flanders, Macbeth* or *The Crucible,* we must distinguish between the values we can identify—those of Fagin or Moll or MacDuff or John Proctor—and those at least implicitly hidden from us—those of Dickens or Fielding, Shakespeare or Miller. It is crucial at this point that we refrain from advocating our

own moral commitments, which abstinence should in no way prevent the honest exchange of pertinent opinion between students and teachers. Our evaluation of the behavior of these characters must derive from our reading of their world primarily, not from our response to our own. The latter marks the application and the usefulness of the reading to a large degree and should, as I suggested earlier, be basically a private matter. It is a crucial response, but it may well lie outside the overt teaching that goes on in a classroom.

To turn again to *Walden,* I do not ask students if they want to reform society by leaving it temporarily or if such an action would be effective in our time or even if society is worth reforming. I do ask them why Thoreau acted as he did, how and why he used his experience to reach his fellow men, and how he altered that experience into high literary art. While I encourage them to speculate, I also ask them to support their intellectual meanderings with material from the work. While I might well note Thoreau's theoretical contribution to the civil rights movement in "Civil Disobedience," I stress that *Walden* is first a work of literary art and that Thoreau lives because he is a superb literary artist who effectively and movingly aims his address at key parts of our common humanity. If he had written badly, his ideas would be less effective and even less relevant, and his works would be read much less frequently both in and out of school. If, as we often say, the form and the content must be one in the writing and the resulting work, so must they be in the reading. As Thoreau himself reminds us in the chapter entitled, "Reading," only the poet is the wholly true reader of a poem.

In the course of class discussion of their reading, my students will express their own values at least implicitly, and I can raise questions in response which may make them investigate and question their own commitments at least initially in terms of the work which is our subject of the moment. I cannot tell them with surety what to believe or what is right and wrong; I can require only that they seek understanding and that they retain an open mind. Rather than judge them, I prefer to evaluate their minds and their growth. To put it all still another way and to risk belaboring briefly what I hope is obvious, when I teach *Julius Caesar,* I do not ask my students if there are any lean and hungry men left in America, for haven't we all become fat and complacent, at least those of us too old to qualify for the Now Generation. They all know the stock response. And they deliver it with the mock sincerity of one who has had many opportunities to practice: "Of course," they would almost

surely tell me, "conformity is a *terrible* thing." And they would probably tell me so in unison. On the other hand, our discussion of character will surely touch on Brutus' fear of Caesar's emergence as a tyrant. To discuss Brutus effectively, my students will have to do some thinking about totalitarianism and the values of free men. But I, for one, refuse to come to the fray wrapped in the American flag.

My students will come to learn, hopefully, that while a work of literature is always the author's and may well become theirs as they choose, it is still always autonomous, meaning not what they or I would like it to mean but, for all its ambiguity and implication, what in fact it does mean. As the young poet, Bink Noll, has written, "The subject must be controlled by the factuality. Facts give vision responsibility. Their concreteness makes poetry passionate." A classic retains its relevance not as it solves our problems day by day or serves as a kind of instant therapy, but as it speaks to us today, as it helps us raise the vital questions and dare to face the answers we find, if we find any and whatever they may be. In class, it seems to me, one of our highest functions is to teach our students the skills to perform this crucial private task. In my classroom I prefer active minds to bared souls. Although I care deeply in a personal way about their capacity and willingness to be moved by a superb poem, I try to educate that capacity and strengthen that willingness by avoiding the sentimental trap of trading opinions which supposedly have value simply because an individual holds them.

If an individual wishes to take a poem because it touches him, and make it into his personal possession even while distorting its meaning, I have no objection so long as he does not confuse what he has done with what the poem itself is, an act of communication. Even while I respect my student's privacy, I also insist that literature is a public form, that, paradoxically, the act of making the poem, the climax of an enormous internal energy, is in fact the artist's surrender of the poem. The teaching of literature, like the teaching of grammar and composition, is in large measure the teaching of communication. Part of the English teacher's responsibility is to teach skills so that his students can reach each other through the written word. The student needs to have a conscious sense of the techniques of effective communication; he needs to learn them so well that they become natural to him. The best writing is always, in part, unconscious; this has nothing to do with whether or not the writer's choices and the resulting work are purposive. We are all sufficiently sophisticated about the nature of the psyche not

to confuse the unconscious with the accidental. The writer of the classic has used his techniques with uncommon mastery to say something of worth; he has managed to communicate through the generations. What better model of writing as public act can there be?

Literature of quality says something about the totality of life, not only adolescence. Moreover, it says it with artistry and conviction. As teachers, we seek also to educate taste, probably our trickiest task. When we try to do so, of course, we open ourselves to all kinds of second-guessing, most of which is appropriate. The point, then, must be that we do not teach simply our own taste but the accumulated means for the recognition of excellence that is part of the heritage of Anglo-American reading and writing. This should in no way negate the importance of the teacher showing his or her own fondness for a particular piece of good writing; it is, I believe, crucial both that he show his enthusiasm to his students and that he scrupulously distinguish between it and the teaching of the work itself. This is the old problem, and I have no solution beyond what many of us already know. Although taste may be largely an individual, subjective matter, there may still be standards beyond the individual, some more useful and perceptive than others. As such, taste can be guided and educated to make certain demands and to seek satisfaction on the more cultivated level rather than less. These standards assume that while there are no final answers, there are more and less effective and appropriate questions to raise in a given situation, as well as skills broadly acknowledged as useful in helping the reader to find his answers while still being true to the work itself. These standards also assume that history plays a role in the development and use of taste, that Shakespeare, for example, is of more value than Robert W. Service, and that modern literature has a definite place in the curriculum. Moreover, they insist that the great critics have had an audience and have made some sense, that popularity and quality are neither sympathetic nor antithetic to each other, that there is in fact a canon and valid means of evaluation—hardly fixed or even absolutely definable—with which the educated taste is familiar. All this does not mean that two trained readers will have the same response to a particular poem, only that beyond their opinion of it, their capacity to be affected by it, and their readiness to accept, if not agree, with its point, they will bring criteria for evaluating its success and its excellence at least in part objective.

One teacher I know teaches a long narrative poem taken seriously by few trained readers because, as he says, "My stu-

dents love it." When I suggested that the poem was not really very good for teaching important concepts about poetry or for educating taste, he fell back on the reactions of the class. Surely, I continued, there must be somewhere in the English language a superior narrative poem which the class would love as well. While poetry no longer need be "noble thoughts nobly expressed," students trained to read a poem and presented with apt poetry of quality will learn that poetry must be a formed statement of an idea or effect through an intense, evocative, suggestive language, and will make legitimate demands on the poems they read. To the degree that a poem succeeds for the trained reader, regardless of when it was written, it deserves a place in the curriculum. The point here is that we seek to produce not English scholars but educated individuals whose reading—and thus, perhaps, whose living—is enriched by their enlarged capacity for learning and enjoyment. Surely a modern approach need not escape the work to justify either the approach or the work itself; let us not confuse modernism in education with anti-intellectuality.

[1]Oscar H. Fidell, "The Classics Need No Defense," Media and Methods, III (November, 1966), p. 16.

[2]Commission on English, Freedom and Discipline in English (New York: c.1965). pp.54-55.

[3]Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. and intro. James M. Cox (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., c.1962), p. 6.

[4]Freedom and Discipline in English, pp. 56-57.

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